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## How to work under Chinese Leaders

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## Understanding paternalistic leadership: How to work with Chinese leaders

The last decade, Chinese companies began to venture beyond their borders and invest internationally. Some examples include Lenovo taking over the computer division of IBM and Huawei, soon to become the largest cell phone manufacturer, expanding relentlessly. As a result, many Westerners now effectively work for Chinese organizations but often face confusion due to little understanding of Chinese culture. Paternalistic leadership (PL) is the most common leadership style in China. It is deeply embedded in Chinese traditions and customs reflecting the culture and society (Wu and Xu, 2012).

This article developed from both a review of the literature on PL and 45 in-depth interviews with Chinese leaders and their subordinates (Sposato, 2016). This systematic data collection is coupled with lived experience, as the author lived, worked, and studied in China for three years. The article's aim is to make the academic literature on PL accessible and lend a practical application through advice for those unfamiliar with PL. An explanation of leadership style and leader behaviors is offered to foster cultural understanding, before suggestions of how to behave in these circumstances.

### Chinese culture

Chinese people have a very distinctive culture, and their traditional culture and values influence their leadership style profoundly. Chinese culture is deeply influenced by Daoism (or Taoism), Confucian philosophy and Legalistic traditions. For example, the Confucian value of harmony is prominent in society and this value permeates Chinese leadership expectations. People are expected to strive for harmony and avoid open conflicts with others, which applies to co-workers as much as any other member of society. Saving face is also part of the social/organizational etiquette that must be upheld. Members of an organization should avoid assigning blame for mistakes made by others, as this behavior leads to public shaming (Sposato and Rumens, 2018).

Loyalty is the most prominent attribute expected in subordinates. Leaders value loyalty in organizations, and frequently it is more important than skills, ability or competence. Loyalty has to be directed toward the leader, even at the expense of loyalty toward the organization (Pellegrini and Scandura, 2008). People will be promoted or overlooked for promotion, based on the leader's opinion of their loyalty. Roles and responsibilities tend to be a lot less well defined than in the west. Leaders tend to assign critical tasks and responsibilities by loyalty or personal judgment, rather than on job descriptions and capabilities.

### Western expectations

In Western settings, there is an expectation that employees should not bring their personal life to work (though in some contexts, the preoccupation with work-life balance might be disrupting this distinction). Those who mix personal and professional lives may be perceived as unprofessional. However, paternalistic leaders are expected to take a personal interest in the personal lives of his (and increasingly her) subordinates. Consequently, the lines between the personal and professional are blurred, as paternalistic leaders aim to create a family-like environment. This impacts the employees, as they will be expected to attend social events during non-working hours with members of the organization.

One of the most salient aspects of paternalistic organizations that people of a different cultural background might find difficult to navigate is the high degree of uncertainty. Plans, ideas, projects, and information do not flow freely in these organizations (Chen and Kao, 2009), where knowledge is power. This is a reflection of Chinese culture, which is often more tolerant of ambiguous uncertain

situations than Western culture. This results in many unclear situations, where work may be assigned at the last minute and employees are not always sure of how their work fits into the big picture.

Paternalistic leadership is based on an expected behavior that the leader should display, and reciprocal behavior from the followers.

#### **The three main Chinese PL behaviors:**

- *benevolence*, which is deeply influenced by the five basic cardinal relationships from Confucian philosophy. Benevolence is used to describe an expectation that favors are to be repaid; these favors can be "cashed in" for other favors in times of need;
- *authoritarianism*, which sees leaders upholding strict control over their subordinates and exercising ultimate authority. Leaders make the main decisions in the organization (without much consultation, if any) but quite often they also make more basic mundane decisions. There is a tendency to micromanage everything in the organization, especially at lower levels (this will undoubtedly surprise westerners);
- *moral*, there being an expectation that the leader should display high moral values and be a guide to the rest of the organization. This is not always the case, but the leader will make a visible effort to be perceived as a person with high morals.

This leadership style may sound entirely alien to Westerners. However, as China grows in importance, Westerners may need advice when managed by a Chinese paternalistic leader.

#### **How to work with a Chinese paternalistic leader:**

- Remember that regardless of whose fault it is, it is never acceptable to point the finger, especially if it is the leader's fault. Never correct the leader and do not highlight any of their mistakes, no matter how visible or how small they are;
- People in the organization will remember favors done to you, and you should do the same. Favors are a currency that can be banked for long periods and used when needed;
- There is an expectation to socialize with your co-workers after working hours. Be ready to sing some Karaoke;
- Do not expect to be empowered when it comes to decision-making, delegation or responsibilities. Expect the entire decision-making process to grind to a halt if the leader is not able to make decisions;
- Do not engage in open conflict with anyone, as it is frowned upon. Also, you never know who has a direct line to the leader;
- Expect high levels of uncertainty regarding work and how it fits into the overall strategy;
- Expect the unexpected; you will not be let down.

PL has attracted scholarly attention, but that has yet to be translated into more practical and accessible language. As such, this paper's main contribution is the outlining of a practical application of PL, by linking this leadership style with advice for those who are unfamiliar with it. Both Chinese

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paternalistic organizations and leaders are very different from organizations and leaders in the West, and in the current Global climate. Because of this, further research is necessary to increase cultural understanding and awareness. As such, this paper will be important for all those who find themselves working with Chinese paternalistic leaders.

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